

Living Shadow 44

Chapter 44 Mask Of Falsehood

The memories of the past were like sharp thorns embedded in Damon Grey's heart, each one a painful reminder of the failures and lessons that shaped him into the jaded young man he was today. And it had all begun with the death of his parents.

"My family lived in a small village a few kilometers off the lands of the Ravenscroft household," Damon started, his voice low and strained, the words dragging up emotions he had long buried.

"It was a small, quiet place... the kind of village where everyone knows everyone. My father was born there. He and my mother were well-known, celebrated even, because they'd both achieved first-class advancement."

He gritted his teeth, the memories cutting deep.

"They were often called 'the heavenly pairing.' My father had the darkness attribute, and my mother... hers was a variation of light. It was called 'Day.' Together, they protected the village with their power."

Damon's stomach growled, but he ignored it, his hunger drowned out by the flood of painful recollections.

"My sister and I were born there. For a time, life was good. Everyone in the village was kind to us, or at least they seemed to be."

Carmen listened in silence, his gaze fixed on the boy, sensing the storm of emotions behind his words.

"It all changed," Damon continued, his voice growing colder,

"when the demons made a massive advancement into Soltheon. The war worsened, and my parents, being at the first-class advancement, were conscripted by the nobles and forced to fight."

He lowered his head, his shoulders trembling slightly.

"They left us behind... my sister and me. At first, the village still treated us kindly. But then, one day, the news came. Our parents were dead."

Carmen's eyes lingered on Damon's face, noting the twisted smile that barely masked the deep pain in the boy's dark eyes.

"Only two things were returned to us," Damon continued, his voice tight.

"My father's broken sword... and a locket that belonged to my mother."

Damon clenched his fists.

"The village held a funeral. I buried the sword, but I couldn't bear to part with the locket. I hid it away, afraid the adults would make me bury it too. Instead, we buried her clothes."

Carmen glanced up at the sun filtering through the trees, his heart heavy with sympathy for the boy's loss.

"With our parents gone, the only relatives we had in the village were my father's distant cousin. We didn't know much about my mother's side, only faint clues from the stories she used to tell us about her brother. Looking back now, I can guess she might have been a noble. But what does that matter? Knowing wouldn't have helped us—two orphaned children left to fend for ourselves."

Bitterness laced Damon's words, his tone hardening as he continued.

"Our new guardians showed their true colors soon enough."

He paused, his jaw tightening.

"They'd always sucked up to my parents when they were alive. But after they were gone, everything changed. They moved into our house, and suddenly everything we did was wrong. They found fault with the slightest thing and used every excuse to beat and starve us. I tried to shield my little sister as best I could, using my juvenile body to protect her. It wasn't long before I was covered in scars."

Carmen's eyes glistened with unshed tears as he listened, his heart breaking for the boy.

"They took everything from us," Damon said bitterly.

"Our inheritance—what little there was—gone. The zeni our parents had left us, my mother's jewelry... all of it. And the villagers? They didn't help. They just stood by and watched. Some even jeered at us, mocked us, threw stones."

Damon's voice faltered for a moment, but he steadied himself, his dark eyes filled with a mixture of pain and anger.

"That's when I learned the truth. Kindness? It's just a mask people wear until it's inconvenient."

Damon's eyes glistened with unshed tears, his voice trembling as years of pent-up anger and anguish spilled out.

"On nights when we starved," he began, his tone dark and bitter,

"I would sneak out into the darkness to catch toads and field mice. I'd roast them so my sister wouldn't go hungry... while they feasted on our money, wore our parents' clothes, and sold off my mother's jewelry."

His gaze shifted to Carmen, filled with an unshakable bitterness.

"That is the real face of people."

Carmen lowered his head, remaining silent. He wasn't here to argue; he was here to listen.

"I got tired of it all," Damon continued, his voice faltering slightly.

"So, one night, I took a noose to the forest. I thought it would be easier to die than to keep living like that."

Carmen's expression grew tense, but he let Damon continue uninterrupted.

"I wandered deep into the woods, strangely untouched by monsters that night. Eventually, I found an ancient tree. Its gnarled roots stretched out like claws, and I sat beneath it with the noose in my hands. I couldn't bring myself to hang it yet. I just sat there, wondering why life had to be so meaningless."

He glanced down at the shifting shadows cast by the firelight, his voice quieting as he recounted the turning point of his story.

"Maybe, deep down, I was just looking for a reason not to die. And I found one."

Carmen's eyes widened slightly, a glimmer of hope in his gaze.

"At the roots of that tree, there was a broken stone slab. On it, someone had carved words—fragments of something greater. I pieced them together. Those words gave me a purpose."

Carmen's throat tightened. He wiped at his eyes.

"What... what did it say?"

Damon raised his head, his dark eyes alight with a mix of fury and defiance.

"We are not asked to be born; we are forced to exist. Today was a horrible day. Tomorrow will be worse. In the end, it will all come to pass. All things fade..."

He exhaled sharply, his clenched fists trembling.

"Those were the words. It wasn't complete, but the part I saw was enough. It taught me about the vast unfairness and insignificance of everything. It should have been the final push to die, but instead, it gave me life. If we're so small, so meaningless... then even as a worm beneath the cosmic vastness, I have the right to struggle. If I'm going to die anyway, then I'll die in blood, screams, and tears, knowing I gave it my all."

Damon gritted his teeth, his voice rising with fervor.

"I made my choice. I would survive. So I returned to the village and began making my plans."

Carmen stared at the boy, both awestruck and disturbed by the raw determination in his voice.

"What plans?"

"My plan to take my sister and escape," Damon replied, his tone steady and resolute.

"I remembered my father mentioning a small house he owned in the capital—Valerion. I decided I would find it, no matter what."

Carmen shook his head slowly, his eyes wide with both admiration and disbelief.

"That must have been a tremendous gamble."

"It was," Damon admitted, his voice colder now.

"But I had nothing left to lose."